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Book Review: *Drawing Card*

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Repository Citation

Peterson, S. D. (2012). Book Review: *Drawing Card*. *The Sport Literature Association*.

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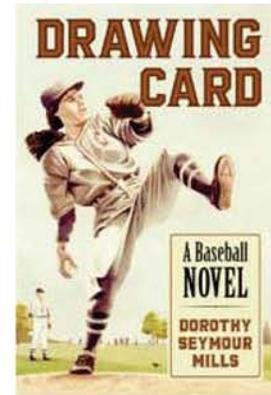
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drawing card

Reviewed by Scott D. Peterson, University of Maine

17 December 2012

Although *Drawing Card* employs many of the standard conventions of a baseball novel, Mills' book also makes significant and surprising departures. Instead of telling the story of a player's experience in the game, the narrative derives primarily from the consequences of a dream denied. The novel also serves as a cultural history of Cleveland of the 1930s and 1940s with side trips to Sicily at various key points in the island's history. Add a soupçon of thriller and intrigue, and all of these elements combine to give the reader a recipe for a unique baseball novel.



As the book's heroine, Annie Cardello is primarily defined as a character by her Sicilian immigrant background and the fact she grew up pitching for one of the women's industrial league baseball teams in Cleveland of the 1930s. Her abilities on the field are good enough to earn her the nickname that serves as the book's title—as well as a minor league contract. While these details are in keeping with any other baseball novel built around the Bildung journey of its protagonist, Annie Cardello is no Lardnerian rube, and this becomes clear when Mills borrows the services of a historical figure to have Kennesaw Mountain Landis void Annie's contract, thus sending her Bildungsheld on a different and unexpected path. On the rebound from this disappointing development, Annie marries John Smith, who is from one of Cleveland's elite White Anglo-Saxon Protestant families. It is from this point that Mills gives her readers a baseball tale of a dream denied as she explores the life of a player whose psyche is shaped by that denial.

Not content to blend fact and fiction in the conventional baseball novel manner, the narrative also makes a number of side trips from its examination of social culture of Cleveland of the 1930s and 1940s to explore parallels in Sicily at various points in time. The reader meets analogues for Annie Cardello Smith in ancient Sicily and also at a later time when the island's three-legged symbol is inspired by the exploits of a determined female runner. Mills herself makes a cameo appearance as a baseball historian at one point.

Taken together, these side trips offer commentary on the present of the novel's storyline and make complimentary comparisons to how the competitive and sportive impulses of women have been systematically frustrated through history.

The book also harkens back to the early days of baseball narratives by including a thriller element that has Annie alternately embracing her family's heritage and running from it. The reader cannot help believing Annie's story would have been dramatically different if she had been given the chance to play baseball professionally in Wrigley's All-American Girls' League, but that would give us *A League of Their Own* instead of *Drawing Card*. Understandably, Annie's reaction to the women of the AAGPBL parallels the reactions of pre-free agency players who retired before the multi-year, multi-million dollar contracts of today's players, who sometimes end their seasons early after complaining of "tired arms."

Mills' novel will appeal to the readers of sport literature who have grown weary of the bright—and masculine—side of the Horatio Alger story, as well as readers who prefer their baseball fiction to be light on play-by-play and statistics. Mills' book will also appeal to readers who are interested in social histories and gender issues. The book has the kind of story that would also translate well to film—especially if Penny Marshall were available to direct.

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